

## Freedom Lives Up to His Name

Back when I first fell in love with birds of prey about 1972, eagles were almost a mythological thing to me. Sure, the books said bald eagles did live in North Carolina, but DDT had devastated their numbers. Only a handful of them were being seen in our state at the time and it looked like they may disappear completely from most of the nation that they represented. Chances were that I may never see a live one, just some dusty old stuffed ones in a museum.



Little did I know that many years later, eagles would make a comeback and nest along the Yadkin and its lakes once again, and that I, along with my co-workers at Dan Nicholas Park, (and even you if you want) -would get to share an epic journey with a live eagle. One hatched right here in a concrete tree close to a carousel, mini train, and a lake with paddleboats. An eagle named Freedom- a name that he would definitely live up to.

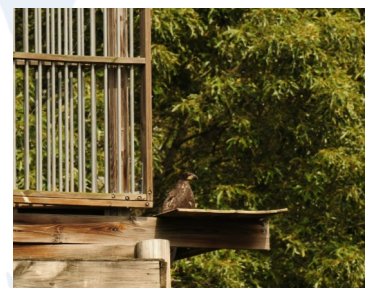


Readers of the *Salisbury Post* know the beginning of the story. Back in March, articles announced that an eagle chick had hatched at Dan Nicholas Park and later that he was sent off to schooling in being wild under the great hands of staff at the Carolina Raptor Center and the great talons of their long term resident eagles Derek and Savannah. I should

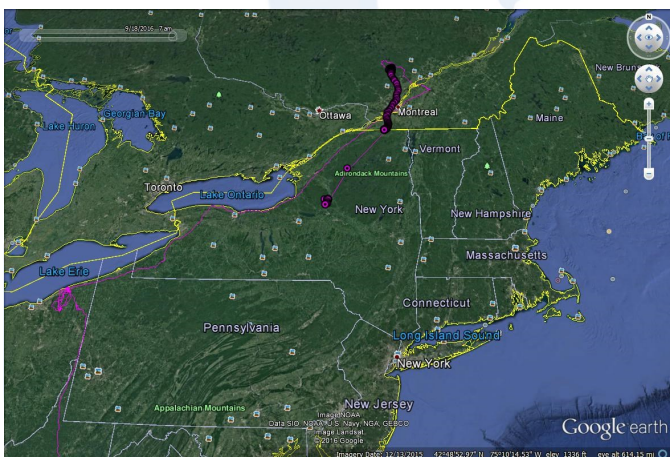
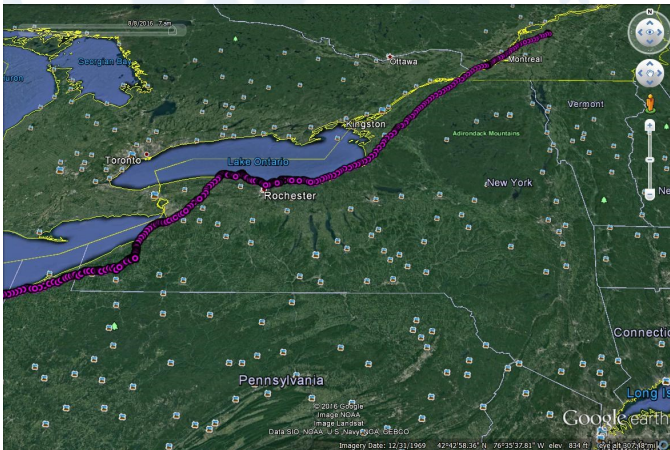
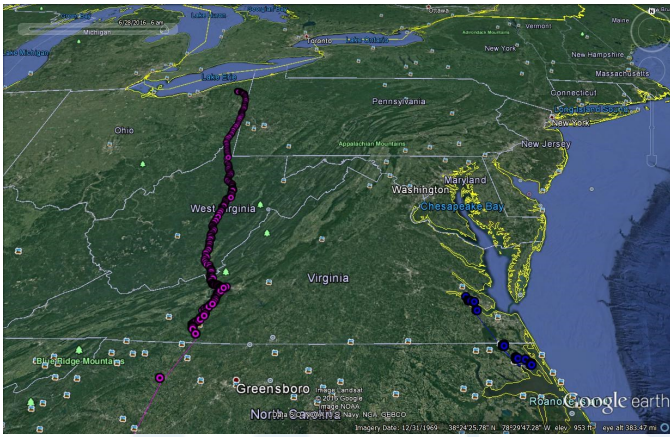
mention here that the reason for this is that the Raptor Center pair of eagles is housed in a much more secluded situation than our eagles. An eaglet growing up too familiar with people is not a good thing. Between this and the expertise of the Raptor Center staff, this was best for young Freedom.



So Derek and Savannah did their job for a while until Freedom was almost ready to fly. Then, he was placed in a tall "hack" tower next to a remote lakeshore in Mecklenburg County. Raptor Center staff fed him through a chute to avoid being seen by him while he grew flight muscles and grew accustomed to his surrounding landscape. No parents around, but food magically appeared each day. In May, on Friday the 13th, some people from the Raptor Center and the NC Museum on Science came and attached a thing to his back. He didn't know it, but this thing was the beginning of a "book" that would tell every day of his life story. And, it could be read by anyone that wanted to at anytime. It was a transmitter that linked his movements to a computer program that charted them on Google \Earth.







A few days later, he took his first short flight. This is a particularly scary time for the people caring for the eaglet and probably for the eagle too. Anything could happen what with coyotes, bobcats, powerlines, cars, and all sorts of hazards.

But Freedom made it through those awkward and scary times and he started to fly. And boy did he fly! For a couple of weeks in late May and early June, he flight hopped around in the trees within a quarter mile of his tower, stopping in for a snack every now and then of that magically appearing food- usually fish. But the last week in June he got motivation. Nobody knows why or what the method is, but young eagles like to go on tour. Within a couple of days and with only a few weeks flight training, and as if there was a plan, Freedom flew across the western Piedmont of North Carolina from south to north. This was from almost the South Carolina line to the Virginia line, then across the western mountains of Virginia over Blacksburg and into West Virginia. For the entire journey, in almost a straight line, he flew on from the southern border of West Virginia north and across Wheeling, on into Ohio. Within about a half a week he flew from south of Charlotte to the shores of Lake Erie in Ohio. Some of the flying was at night. It was as if he knew that he would like a spot near a power plant on Lake Erie. And he did like it. Except for a few short flights about 50 miles south of that one spot, he stayed there almost all of July. The fishing must have been good.

For some reason, the end of July made Freedom want to move. This time he followed the edge of Lake Erie

north and east into Pennsylvania and on across western New York to Lake Ontario. At the end of the first week in August, Freedom left the US of A and was flying directly over the city of Montreal! For most of the last half of August our American bald eagle was living in a remote wilderness area of Quebec, Canada.

Suddenly, something has changed again. For the last ten days, starting on September the 13th, Freedom has been heading in the general direction of- home! On Friday night the 23rd , the last signal picked up from his transmitter showed him at 7pm to be sitting in a small grove of trees surrounded by fields. He was about two miles east of Covington, Pennsylvania. From there he continued south. At about 10:40 pm on the night of September 29th Freedom entered North Carolina airspace and spent the rest of the night very close to our border with Virginia. By next night, he came to rest on the shores of a small lake in Randolph County 20 miles from where he hatched at Dan Nicholas Park. He id not stop by to visit mom and dad but continued on south,



staying close to the Yadkin/Pee Dee River. Around 4pm Sunday October 2nd afternoon, Freedom crossed the NC/SC line, finally coming to rest about 9:40 pm just south of Columbia.

So far it has been a fascinating journey to watch. You can join in. Just download the Animal Tracker app to your smart phone. Then search for Freedom. You can peruse his entire journey, detail out the last two weeks, or zoom in with Google Earth imagery to where he is today. This is all on satellite imagery as if you are looking at exactly what he is.

Unlike Pokemon, Freedom is really out there, living up to his name in a grand way.

There is another fascinating story about eagles that most North Carolinians don't know about. Most folks don't know that we also have golden eagles in North Carolina. Not year round, but in the winter, a group of golden eagles that nest in eastern Canada in the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, and Labrador head south and spend the winter in the southern Appalachians. A few of them wind up in the mountains of North Carolina. Read more about it on the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission website at:

[http://www.ncwildlife.org/Portals/0/Learning/documents/WINC/Sample\\_14/March-April-The-Golden-Eagle-Has-Landed.pdf](http://www.ncwildlife.org/Portals/0/Learning/documents/WINC/Sample_14/March-April-The-Golden-Eagle-Has-Landed.pdf) and <http://www.ncwildlife.org/Portals/0/Conserving/documents/2015-WDP-First-Qtr-Report.pdf>.

Look up every now and then. What you see may surprise you.



All photos provided by Carolina Raptor Center and Dan Nicholas Park Nature Center staff.